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ABSTRACT

The purpose of second (or foreign) language classroom research is to answer important questions about the learning and teaching of foreign languages. This kind of research collects data from genuine language classrooms or from experimental settings sometimes established to replicate what takes place in the classroom. Classroom research can focus on teachers or learners, or on the interaction between the two. Four traditions have been identified as methods employed in classroom research. These include: (1) psychometric studies; (2) interaction analysis; (3) discourse analysis; and (4) interaction analysis. Because the language classroom is specifically designed to facilitate language learning, it seems logical that more research should be carried out there. More research is needed that focuses specifically on what does and does not take place in the language classroom. (VWL)

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# ERIC Digest

# Second Language Classroom Research

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## *What Is Second Language Classroom Research?*

Second (or foreign) language classroom research is research that is carried out in the language classroom for the purpose of answering important questions about the learning and teaching of foreign languages. This kind of research derives its data from either genuine foreign language classrooms (classrooms specifically constituted for the purposes of foreign language learning and teaching) or in experimental laboratory settings that are set up for the purpose of research. These experimental settings are sometimes established to replicate or recreate what happens in language classrooms, although more often than not laboratory settings make no pretense at such replication.

## *What Are Some of the Aims and Issues in Classroom Research?*

Classroom research can focus on teachers or on learners, or on the interaction between teachers and learners. Teacher-focused research examines such factors as the classroom decision-making processes of teachers, and what is referred to as teacher talk. Teacher talk encompasses the kinds of questions that teachers ask, the amount and type of talking that teachers do, the type of error correction and feedback that teachers provide, and the speech modifications teachers make when talking to second language learners.

Research that focuses on the learner looks at, for example, the developmental aspects of learner language, the learning styles and strategies used by different learners, the type of language prompted by various types of materials and pedagogic tasks, the classroom interaction that takes place between learners, and the effect of this interaction on learner language development.

A great deal of second language classroom research is carried out within the subdiscipline of applied linguistics known as Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The ultimate goal of SLA research is to describe and to predict the stages that learners pass through in acquiring a second language, and to identify the processes through which learners acquire the target language. The purpose of classroom-oriented research is to identify the pedagogic variables that may facilitate or impede acquisition. The variables may relate to the learner, the teacher, the instructional treatment/environment or some form of interaction among these factors.

## *What Are Specific Questions Addressed by Recent Second Language Classroom Research?*

••What types of classroom organization and grouping patterns facilitate second language development?
••What types of tasks and activities facilitate acquisition?
••What are the characteristics of teacher talk (including how much teachers talk, the kinds of questions they ask, the type of error feedback they provide, how and what kind of instruction/direction they give) and what are the implications of this talk for acquisition?
••Does formal instruction make a difference to the rate or route of acquisition?
••What affective variables correlate with second language achievement?
••What type of teacher speech modifications facilitate comprehension and, by implication, acquisition?
••What interactional modifications between learners facilitate comprehension, and by implication, acquisition?



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One major branch of SLA research that is concerned with the identification of the learning processes focuses on the similarities and differences between input and interaction inside as well as outside the classroom. It has been observed that there are clear differences in the patterns of interaction, language functions, types of teacher questions, and so on, found both in the classroom and in natural settings outside of the classroom. (See, for example, research reviewed by Chaudron, 1988, for a summary of the similarities and differences that exist between the two settings and the possible consequences of these for acquisition.) The implications of these differences, and the extent to which classroom interaction should resemble real life interaction, are still being debated (van Lier, 1988).

### *What Research Traditions Are Employed by Second Language Classroom Teachers?*

Chaudron (1988) identifies four traditions in second language classroom research: (1) psychometric studies, (2) interaction analysis, (3) discourse analysis, and (4) ethnographic analysis. Psychometric studies typically involve the use of the so-called experimental method with pre- and post-tests for both control and experimental groups. Interaction and discourse analysis involve the use of analytical observation schemes. The former focuses on the social meanings inherent in classroom interaction, while the latter focuses on the linguistic aspects of interaction. The fourth tradition identified by Chaudron is classroom ethnography. According to Chaudron, this tradition does not strive for objectivity or neutrality, but offers interpretive analyses of the events occurring in the classroom. Whether interaction analysis and discourse analysis represent distinct traditions of classroom research is a matter of debate. It could be argued that they are methods of data collection rather than separate traditions. If this view is accepted, then Chaudron's four traditions become just two--the psychometric and the ethnographic, and this mirrors the commonly observed distinction within the mainstream educational literature between qualitative and quantitative methods. (Although, in recent years, it has been observed that this distinction is oversimplistic.)

### *What Are Some of the Future Directions for Classroom Research?*

The fact that the language classroom is specifically designed for the purpose of facilitating language learning should constitute sufficient justification for studying what goes on there. Despite the opportunity for studying second language acquisition through classroom research, and despite the growing attention the second language acquisition field is receiving, there is still comparatively little research that is actually carried out in language classrooms. More research is needed that focuses on what does or does not take place in the language classroom. The existence, and indeed persistence, of this state of ignorance may seem surprising given the frequency with which attempts are made to import insights into the second language classrooms from research conducted outside the classroom. The most pressing need at the moment is for contextualized research, that is, research that is carried out in real classrooms, not in simulated environments that are constituted for the purposes, not of teaching and learning, but of research. In addition, research is needed in areas that broaden the agenda away from a rather narrow focus on input and interaction as defined by one particular tradition of second language acquisition research. Finally, much current research is couched within a tradition that assumes that learning takes place in a social vacuum; and there is, in consequence, the need for counterbalancing research that takes cognizance of social and interpersonal variables and their effects on the language that learners use and learn.

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